



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Partnership Peaks

San Juan National Forest Partner Stories, Opportunities, and Updates

Fall 2023



Aspen leaves getting ready for winter in the San Juan Mountains

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

By Abe Proffitt

Fall is a dazzling season, especially in the forests of Southwest Colorado where thousands of people flock every year to appreciate the mosaic of red, orange, and golden leaves scattered through the forest. It's not hard to imagine the skilled work of a painter capturing the changing landscape from a distant vantage point.

As land managers, we often do as the painter does – viewing and/or managing resources in our public lands, with the help of partner organizations, from a much larger landscape-scale perspective. When we redirect a stream channel or trail junction, for instance, we're considering the full scale of that design's impact – from the small-scale erosion and vegetation patterns to the large impacts of watershed health and community wellbeing.

Much like the changing seasons, our work and employee organization fluctuate each year. Recently, we've reorganized our Public Affairs department, so this issue is smaller than usual. Stay tuned for the winter edition as we have a bunch of fun projects to share with you!

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Leadership Corner



I was freshly arrived on the San Juan and just settling in when the Spring edition of our Partnership Peaks newsletter was issued. I spoke then about the incredible array of cooperative relationships and opportunities I saw and how extraordinary the “partnersphere” is here in Southwest Colorado. The past 7 months have only reinforced that sentiment.

The newsletter highlighted that we were entering into the Spring “agreements season” as we worked together on the various instruments and financial plans to formalize our working relationships – and most importantly to agree on the shared work we needed to accomplish.

As I stood at my desk yesterday compiling various measures of resource stewardship and public service work accomplished over the past federal fiscal year, I received a short summary from our Forest Service Grants and Agreements superstar Lindsey Burkett (big shoutout to Lindsey – she’s so good at this!).

Lindsey reported that together we established **51 new agreements** and **39 agreement** modifications representing over **\$13.7 million** in partnership investment toward our shared stewardship goals. I’ll just pause for a moment and let that sink in. That figure is close to the total operating budget of the National Forest I started my career on (a few) years ago!

And of course that only hints at the real story, which is best told by the work on the ground, the connections made between people and the land, and the sowing of future stewards for our National Forests and Grasslands, and other lands stewarded in the public trust.

This newsletter carries some of those stories, and very importantly recognizes the work of our long-serving (and outgoing) Partnership Coordinator Lo Williams, and welcomes our new Partnership Coordinator Abe Proffitt who assumed the role on September 10. Abe’s already running at full stride and we’re thrilled to have him carry on this important work.

Thanks to you all and have a wonderful autumn!

Growing Trees in Mine Waste

Experimental tree planting at the Brooklyn Mine Site



Engelmann Spruce saplings clinging to a rocky slope below the Brooklyn Mine

By Abe Proffitt

On a precipitous rocky slope, just above highway 550 towards Red Mountain Pass, are hundreds of Engelmann Spruce saplings. In fact, there are thousands of coniferous tree saplings growing every year in this region, but this little patch of baby Engelmann Spruce is a unique collection: the trees are growing in a pile of mine waste.

In 2019, Gretchen Fitzgerald (then a forester with the San Juan National Forest) and Mountain Studies Institute (MSI) embarked on a groundbreaking science experiment to see if trees could grow in soil contaminated with hard mineral deposits.

The experimental project took place at the Brooklyn Mine site, an abandoned mine from the early 1900s used for gold, silver, and zinc extraction. In the 1990s, the Forest Service began cleaning up the site by diverting mine wastewater from collapsed access tunnels and waste rock piles. One of the most significant and enduring problems with historic mining sites, like the Brooklyn Mine, is that the soils and water sources become highly mineralized and acidic. This makes it nearly impossible for native vegetation to survive.

For the project, Fitzgerald and MSI used Engelmann Spruce seeds

Brooklyn Mine

collected onsite and planted roughly 900 seeds on the western and southern slopes surrounding the mine.

With each planting, they used a combination of excelsior wood straw mulch to control erosion and biochar to help stabilize soil pH levels. Biochar is a charcoal-like material that is produced from grasses, agricultural and forest residues that are decomposed at high temperatures.

During the process, the physical and chemical properties of plant matter change into a highly porous, stable, carbon-rich material that can increase the pH, plant nutrient availability, and water-holding capacity of soils.

Several years ago, MSI used biochar to stabilize soil pH levels in a mine tailing project and had great success. Results indicated that the addition of biochar increased vegetation cover by 240%, water holding capacity by 90%-180%, and seed emergence by 350% on acidic soils.



Southern slope with Engelmann saplings

Over the next four years, the project slowly receded into the background with changes in staffing and landscape priorities in the Forest. Meanwhile, nature took its course.



Silverton student removing the shield

This past spring, however, there was a renewed interest in the Brooklyn Mine site. In September, MSI staff and a group of Silverton High School students took data points for future monitoring, such as the sapling's physical condition, coloration, and height. They also removed over 200 plastic covering surrounding each sapling, which were installed as protection from the sun and elements.

Spruce trees require a bit of shade during their first years of growth and since the region gets a healthy amount of precipitation each year, these plastic shields were a necessity.

Brooklyn Mine

Overall, they saw **close to a 100% survival rate**, which may be due to a combination of factors, including the introduction of biochar, the durability of the tree species, or the planting location. Whatever the reason, the project brings a novel optimism to the future of mining reclamation development. In a region with an abundant mining history with lasting downstream effects, we need more projects like this--fueled by creativity and developed by resourceful partners. Check out more photos from the field trip below!



Meet your Public Affairs Team!

The Public Affairs Team on the San Juan National Forest is growing and changing! Last spring, former Partnership Coordinator Lo Williams moved into the new Shared Stewardship Communications Specialist position. Last month, Abe Proffitt, another San Juan employee, moved into the vacant Partnership Coordinator position. Just this week we are being joined by our brand new Public Affairs Officer, Kris Allen! We can't wait to bring you more great stories!



Kris Allen - Public Affairs Officer

I'm excited to have been selected as the public affairs specialist for the San Juan National Forest! I'm from St. Joseph, MO, but have lived in Maryland, Japan, California, Virginia, Texas, Colorado and Nebraska. My background in public affairs started with 11 1/2 years in the Navy as a mass communication specialist. I learned print and broadcast journalism, public affairs, and photojournalism at the Defense Information School. My first duty station was with American Forces Network in the Tokyo area, followed by the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz. I wrapped up my active duty time at the Naval Criminal Investigative Service headquarters in the DC area. After the Navy, I pursued a bachelor's degree with a double major in ag business and equine science. I started out in civilian federal service in 2019 as a VIS for the Dillon Ranger District in the White River NF, then went back to public affairs with the Space Force in Colorado Springs, and finally to my current position with the Air Force at Offutt Air Force Base, NE, to be closer to and help out some family. Since returning to the Department of Defense, my primary roles have been as an editor, social media manager, and website administrator, while still writing articles and taking photos. I love to travel and have been to most of the U.S. states and quite a few different countries. I also love to work with animals, be outdoors, take photos, read, learn new things, and support various veteran causes. I know southwest Colorado is stunning, and I can't wait to get boots on the ground in Durango and start learning all about the amazing San Juan NF and the surrounding areas. I look forward to meeting and working with all of you on the SJNF team!

Meet your Public Affairs Team!



**Lorena Williams - Shared Stewardship
Communications Specialist**

I started my career with the USFS in 2001 on the Boise NF before moving to the Bridger-Teton as a heli-rappeller and eventually to the Coconino NF in Recreation and Fire Prevention. I came to the San Juan in 2015 with Durango Helitack prior to moving into Dispatch then the Partnership Coordinator position in 2019. I have an MFA in Environmental Nonfiction and have taught college creative writing, composition, ESL, and rhetoric. I love working on my vegetable farm in Ignacio, backpacking in the desert, and trying to stay afloat on our great Southwestern rivers in my new inflatable kayak, Malachite.



Abe Proffitt - Partnership Coordinator

I began my FS career in 2020 as a Resource Assistant for the GMUG - Ouray Ranger District on a visitation impact study. In 2021, I interned with the San Juan NF PAO where I helped re-establish the Partnership Peaks Newsletter and connected with FS staff and partners through local and regional projects. In 2022, I was hired as a Harvest Inspector at the Dolores RD and learned landscape-scale restoration management practices. Joining the PAO has been an important goal for me and I am excited to foster and support meaningful partnerships throughout our beautiful corner of Colorado.

Partnership Opportunities



On National Public Lands Day this year, volunteers installed log pour-over structures on a tributary of the upper Dolores River watershed. Their goal was to create plunge pools that provide cutthroat trout with distributed and resilient refuge areas during low-flow years. Thanks to partner organizations and their volunteers, we hope to accomplish several more projects like this throughout the San Juan Forest!

An important element we want to highlight in this newsletter is our commitment to our partners. The San Juan National Forest works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of this region's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. One way to achieve that is through partner connection. Our partners include land management agencies across all levels of government, nonprofit and for-profit entities, tribes, and community groups. By working with partners with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, we are increasing the resiliency of our natural resources and strengthening the community that enjoys and works in these lands. For information about partnering with the USFS, follow this link: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/partnerships>

To become a partner with the San Juan NF or for questions, contact Abe Proffitt (SJNF Partnership Coordinator) by email at abraham.proffitt@usda.gov or by phone at (970) 501-0261.

For general questions about the San Juan NF, call (970) 247-4874, visit the forest website, or follow us on social media:



Welcome New Employees

We've had many great new employees this quarter and we were unable to gather all of your photos, but we are excited to welcome each and every one of you!



Tracy Milakovic
District FMO
Pagosa RD



Amy Schwarzbach
Public Services Staff Officer
Supervisor's Office



Mike Schmidt
Wildlife Biologist
Columbine RD



Charley Morgan
Recreation Staff Officer
Columbine RD



Jordan Burningham
Trails Manager
Columbine RD



Shawn Kelley
Tribal Liaison Specialist
Supervisor's Office



Byron Munda
Invasive Species Plant Specialist
Supervisor's Office



Corey Wilson
Asst. Fire Management Officer
Pagosa RD